


Bridging the Gap in a Changing World: New Opportunities and Challenges for Engaging Practitioners and the Public

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Abstract: In recent years, an array of initiatives has sought to bridge widely recognized gaps separating international studies scholars from policymakers and the public. While such gaps persist, changes in society, the media, and academia have altered the context for scholars seeking to make their research known to public and policy communities. On the one hand, the emergence on the public agenda of new policy concerns, proliferation of public-facing outlets seeking to feature scholarly expertise, and growing attention to diversity and inclusion have reduced some of the barriers to gap-bridging work. On the other hand, tenure and promotion standards continue to place limited weight on public engagement, political attacks on experts have raised new barriers to bridging, and social media often serve as sites of discrimination and harassment. We take stock of these shifts and use a scenario exercise to consider how the landscape for bridging the gap might evolve further in the years ahead. Focusing on potential changes in research funding models and the relationship between international studies scholarship and geopolitics, we highlight new bridging opportunities and challenges that may emerge over the next decade.

Resumen: Durante los últimos años, ha tenido lugar una serie de iniciativas que intentan cerrar las brechas, ampliamente reconocidas, que separan a los académicos de estudios internacionales de los responsables políticos y del público. A pesar de que tales brechas persisten, los cambios en la sociedad, en los medios de comunicación y en el ámbito académico han alterado el contexto para los académicos que buscan dar a conocer su investigación tanto a las comunidades públicas como a las comunidades políticas. Por un lado, el hecho de que aparecieran nuevas preocupaciones políticas en la agenda pública, la proliferación de medios de comunicación orientados al público que buscan presentar conocimientos académicos y la creciente atención a la diversidad y a la inclusión han reducido algunas de las barreras que existían en el trabajo de reducción de

las brechas. Por otro lado, las normas de titularidad y de promoción continúan otorgando un peso limitado a la participación pública, los ataques políticos contra los expertos han creado nuevas barreras que dificultan la reducción de la brecha, y las redes sociales se convierten con frecuencia en lugares donde prima la discriminación y el acoso. Hacemos un balance de estos cambios y utilizamos un ejercicio de escenarios con el fin de plantearnos cómo podría seguir evolucionando, aún en mayor medida, el panorama en relación con el cierre de la brecha durante los próximos años. Destacamos, centrándonos en los cambios potenciales en los modelos de financiación de la investigación y en la relación entre los académicos de estudios internacionales y la geopolítica, las nuevas oportunidades para cerrar la brecha, así como los desafíos que pueden surgir en la próxima década.

Résumé: Ces dernières années, nombre d'initiatives tentent de bâtir des ponts pour rapprocher les chercheurs en études internationales d'une part, et les législateurs et le public d'autre part. Bien que des fossés persistent, l'évolution de la société, des médias et de la recherche a modifié le contexte où évoluent les chercheurs qui souhaitent communiquer leurs recherches au public et aux législateurs. D'un côté, l'apparition de nouvelles préoccupations politiques dans les programmes, la prolifération des supports de diffusion souhaitant inclure une expertise académique, ainsi que l'attention croissante à la diversité et l'inclusion ont effacé certains obstacles à la création de ces ponts. De l'autre, les normes régissant la titularisation à l'université et la promotion accordent encore peu d'importance à l'implication du public, les attaques politiques sur des experts créent de nouveaux obstacles à l'établissement de ponts et les réseaux sociaux servent souvent de lieux de discrimination et de harcèlement. Après l'évaluation de ces nouvelles tendances, nous employons un exercice où un scénario permet d'analyser comment les conditions de rapprochement pourraient évoluer dans les années à venir. Nous nous concentrons sur les changements potentiels des modèles de financement de la recherche et de la relation entre les chercheurs en études internationales et la géopolitique pour mettre en évidence de nouveaux ponts possibles et des défis qui pourraient apparaître au cours de la prochaine décennie.

Keywords: public engagement, research communication, policy relevance, international relations, bridging the gap

Palabras clave: participación pública, comunicación de la investigación, relevancia de las políticas, relaciones internacionales, cerrar la brecha

Mots clés: implication du public, communication de la recherche, pertinence politique, relations internationales, combler le fossé

Introduction

In 2006, four graduate students at the University of California at Berkeley, with the support of a faculty mentor at the Institute of International Studies, organized a workshop for PhD students interested in producing policy-relevant research.¹ The workshop developed into an annual event, and, with support from Carnegie Corporation of New York, the initiative expanded to become Bridging the Gap (BTG), a multi-university effort designed to connect scholarship and policy on international

¹The students were Naazneen Barma, Brent Durbin, Matthew Kroenig, and Ely Ratner. The faculty mentor was Steven Weber.

issues.² In the ensuing years, a constellation of other initiatives—many of them also funded by Carnegie Corporation—emerged to promote greater linkages between research and practice.³

Broadly speaking, these initiatives were motivated by the concern of some scholars that academia and the policy world were drifting apart (George 1993; Leggold 1998; Jentleson 2002; Putnam 2003; Walt 2005; Nye 2008; Del Rosso 2015). As Bruce Jentleson wrote in 2002, “The problem is not just the gap between theory and policy but its chasm-like widening in recent years and the limited valuation of efforts, in Alexander George’s phrase, at ‘bridging the gap’” (Jentleson 2002, 169). In that context, bridging efforts during the early part of the twenty-first century, which we call Bridging 1.0, largely centered on bringing scholars into greater contact with policymakers and helping scholars understand how to make their work more relevant and accessible to decision-makers. For instance, BTG’s International Policy Summer Institute, launched in 2011, trains faculty in the dissemination of research findings to policy and public audiences.⁴

These bridging efforts have made substantial progress. It is now common, as we document below, for international studies scholars to publish accessible versions of their work in nonacademic outlets, such as policy magazines and blogs. At the same time, however, the context for bridging has transformed over the past decade, resulting in an evolution to Bridging 2.0. In this article, we examine how the landscape for linking research and policy has evolved in recent years, as well as how it might evolve further in the years ahead.

We define bridging the gap as efforts to connect the knowledge or expertise of university-based scholars to the concerns or responsibilities of policy practitioners and the broader public. With this definition in mind, we argue that changes in society, the media, and academia have created new opportunities and challenges for scholars interested in bridging the gap. This evolution to Bridging 2.0 includes several welcome developments: a proliferation of outlets publishing policy-relevant work by scholars; new opportunities for dialogue through social media; a generational shift among many younger scholars toward greater interest in policy relevance and public engagement; growing recognition within universities of the value of these pursuits; and more appreciation of the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion. These changes have coincided with the emergence of an array of new transnational and intermestic issues on the public agenda, as well as a rise in political polarization and populist attacks on expertise. Collectively, these dynamics have created openings for a larger and more diverse group of scholars to engage with public and policy communities, while also raising new obstacles to effective bridging.

Today’s bridging environment is very different from that of 2006, and we see no reason to believe that it has reached a persistent equilibrium. To better understand these changes and preview what might come next, this essay proceeds with a review of prior research on bridging and an examination of the shift from Bridging 1.0 to Bridging 2.0. We then explore the future of scholar–policy interaction through a scenario analysis exercise, one of the tools BTG has employed in its training workshops for PhD students and beyond. This exercise provides insight into key uncertainties about the future bridging environment, in areas including

² See <https://bridgingthegaproject.org/>.

³ These initiatives include the Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) Project at William & Mary, Perry World House at the University of Pennsylvania, Carnegie International Policy Scholars Consortium and Network at Johns Hopkins University, Scholars Strategy Network, and projects based at the Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security & Diplomacy at the University of Denver, Henry J. Leir Institute at Tufts University, Institute for the Study of Diplomacy at Georgetown University, International Security Center at the University of Notre Dame, Clements Center for National Security at the University of Texas, Austin, and Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. In addition, BTG has expanded its own programming since 2018, thanks to support from the Raymond Frankel Foundation.

⁴ See <https://bridgingthegaproject.org/programs/ipsi/>.

approaches to funding research and the relationship between research and geopolitics. We conclude with recommendations for improving the quality and availability of relevant expertise for improving policy decision-making.

Prior Work on Bridging

Literature on bridging the gap has itself evolved over the past few decades. The first generation of scholarship about bridging focused on making the case for why scholars should engage more directly with policy questions and explaining how research can be useful to policymakers. More recent work has emphasized the value of a wider range of public and civic engagement, and used empirical data to analyze patterns in bridging behavior. Meanwhile, some critics of bridging efforts have defended the value of grand theory and called for maintaining distance between academic and policy pursuits.

The foundational work on the relationship between international relations (IR) research and foreign policy is Alexander George's (1993) book, *Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy* (George 1993). George argued that the gap can be bridged, although not eliminated, if scholars and policymakers "put aside stereotypes of each other and focus instead on their shared interest in better understanding the relationship between knowledge and action" (George 1993, 135–36). Accordingly, George advised scholars to learn what types of knowledge policymakers need. He suggested that such knowledge includes conceptual frameworks for foreign policy strategies and understanding of the conditions in which certain strategies are more or less likely to succeed.

Other political scientists and IR scholars built on George's work and took the scholarly community to task for neglecting policy relevance (Lepgold 1998; Nincic and Lepgold 2000; Jentleson 2002; Putnam 2003; Walt 2005; Nye 2008; Mead 2010; Del Rosso 2015; Héritier 2016; Durbin 2019). Some scholars emphasized the societal responsibility of the discipline of political science to link its mission more "to the challenges that face the world" (Jentleson 2002, 181) or "to the concerns of our fellow citizens" (Putnam 2003, 249–50). Related calls urged the elevation of policy relevance as a criterion for evaluating faculty research and achievement (Walt 2005, 42; Nye 2008). A major recent study argued that an excessive emphasis by IR scholars on highly technical quantitative and formal methods had widened the gap between the scholarly and policy communities (Desch 2019).

As this literature grew, it expanded in scope to consider a wide array of types of bridging. While some of the early writing on bridging focused primarily on links with US foreign policy officials, scholars increasingly examined bridging in a variety of political and policy contexts (Murphy and Fulda 2011; Busby 2018; Goldgeier 2018), including interaction with policymakers in European capitals (Bailes et al. 2011; Blagden 2019), work with international institutions and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (Smith 2020; Mikhael and Norman 2021), civic engagement (Dobbs et al. 2021; Bennion 2022), partnerships with private firms (King and Persily 2020), involvement in political advocacy (Green 2018), writing for public audiences (Snyder 2018; Farrell and Knight 2019), relevance to marginalized communities (Sjoberg 2015), the teaching of students (Gavin 2015; Blankshain, Cooper, and Gvosdev 2021), and the use of scenario analysis to generate policy-relevant research programs (Barma et al. 2016). Other work conceptualized different dimensions of policy relevance and influence (Horowitz 2015; Maliniak et al. 2020), explored best practices for engaging responsibly with practitioners and public audiences (Berling and Bueger 2013; Hendrix 2019; Akoto 2020), or emphasized the importance of collaboration between scholars and partners outside academia in the design of research projects (Firchow and Gelman 2021; Campbell and Tama, Forthcoming). And given that scholarly ideas can be misused by policymakers (discussed further below), recent work has warned that while seeking to address concerns about a

“cult of irrelevance,” scholars cannot ignore problems that can arise from a “cult of relevance” (Barma and Goldgeier 2022).

Some research has also analyzed the empirical patterns of bridging efforts. Much of this work has been conducted using survey data collected by the Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) Project. Studies using these and other data have found that most articles in IR journals do not concern current policy debates or include policy recommendations (Maliniak et al. 2011), that most American IR scholars believe that policy-relevant publications are undervalued in tenure decisions (Maliniak, Peterson, and Tierney 2019), and that deans of international affairs schools differ from chairs of political science departments in expecting their faculty both to excel on traditional academic metrics and to be engaged with policy questions (Desch et al. 2022). In terms of what practitioners want from scholars, studies have found that while national security policymakers largely remain skeptical of social science research (Avey and Desch 2014), many international trade and international development practitioners find such scholarly research to be valuable (Avey et al. 2022). Recent studies also challenge a common view that quantitative work is not conducive to policy influence, finding ample evidence of bridging involving quantitative studies (Fazal 2016; Maliniak et al. 2020; Avey et al. 2022; Feather 2023).

At the same time as the literature on bridging has grown, some scholars have defended the value of abstract theory, called for maintaining distance between research and current policy concerns, or offered other critiques. Some of these bridging skeptics maintain that more rigorous theory boosts the utility of IR by helping people conceptualize world affairs and by producing more clarity about causal forces in international politics (Frieden and Lake 2005, 137; Eriksson 2014). Other scholars argue that the examination of fundamental questions, rather than near-term policy concerns, can give researchers more foundational influence on politics (Jahn 2017; Musgrave 2020, 136). Additional work urges less focus on whether scholars are getting the attention of practitioners and more focus on whether the ideas propagated by scholars are sound ones that are backed up by rigorous research (Voeten 2015). In this context, bridging proponents have continued emphasizing real-world relevance in addition to, not instead of, theory qua theory, arguing that encouraging and valuing a range of approaches to scholarly work make political science and IR all the richer (Jentleson and Ratner 2011, 6).

From Bridging 1.0 to Bridging 2.0

While this literature has explored extensively the questions of whether and how to bridge the gap, scholars have given much less attention to shifts in the broader context for bridging. We next consider how changes in society, the media, and the academic profession have prompted the shift from Bridging 1.0 to Bridging 2.0.

Society

The societal landscape for bridging the gap has changed markedly from Bridging 1.0 to Bridging 2.0. The emergence on the public agenda of new issues and concerns has created openings for new scholarly voices with different sets of expertise to engage with a greater variety of policy actors and audiences. At the same time, increased societal polarization and partisan attacks on science and expertise have sometimes made it more difficult for scholars to establish credibility with policymakers and members of the public across the political spectrum. In developing this part of our argument, we draw on the work of scholars such as Daniel Drezner and Tom Nichols who have analyzed the shifting societal marketplace for ideas (Drezner 2017; Nichols 2017).

Recent years have seen an array of issues rise to the forefront of the global agenda that demand new kinds of expertise, including the COVID-19 pandemic, racial injustice, artificial intelligence, cyber conflict, climate change, disinformation, and democratic backsliding. These issues have not generally been at the heart of IR theory building, and their complex character calls for integrating knowledge from a variety of fields and disciplines. This means that public and policy conversations on these topics benefit from being informed by a range of scholars with diverse expertise that extends well beyond that of the “usual suspects” of established IR professors. These scholars, often earlier in their careers, must possess both the knowledge needed to offer informed and fresh insights about these challenges and the wherewithal to communicate about them with public and policy audiences. The emergence of complex and multidimensional issues on the global agenda also means that international studies scholars increasingly need to partner with scholars with training in other fields and disciplines in order to generate and disseminate useful knowledge about these issues.

In one example of an effort to link research and policy on a new issue of global concern, BTG convened a workshop in 2019 in partnership with the Center for a New American Security on the rise of digital authoritarianism. Participants in the workshop, which was part of the BTG New Voices in National Security initiative, included university-based scholars with expertise on digital technologies and illiberalism, as well as practitioners from US government agencies and other policy institutions.⁵ The dialogue among these scholars and practitioners generated a variety of policy recommendations for countering digital authoritarianism (Barma, Durbin, and Kendall-Taylor 2020; Feldstein 2020; Gunitsky 2020; Weiss 2020).

The emergence of new transnational concerns also opens up opportunities for engagement with nontraditional types of policy actors. Bridging on traditional IR topics, such as great power politics or nuclear arms control, tends to center on national-level government decision-makers. On emerging issues such as global health, the environment, cyber threats, and race relations, key practitioners are likely to operate in other institutional contexts, including international organizations, NGOs, local government, and the private sector. In one effort to adapt to this reality, IR scholar Joshua Busby organized a side event (cosponsored by BTG) at the 2018 Global Climate Action Summit in San Francisco that featured scholars and practitioners discussing the roles of actors other than national governments in leading responses to climate change.⁶ Busby later built on this work while serving as a Senior Advisor for Climate at the US Defense Department from 2021 to 2022.

Yet, this shifting global landscape also presents challenges when it comes to bridging, given that the development of academic expertise tends to lag behind developments in the real world. For established scholars, changing one’s research agenda to focus on an emerging issue can be unappealing or daunting. Many contributions to knowledge on new issues are likely to come from scholars at earlier stages of their careers, who often lack the networks and professional incentives for policy engagement. In addition, the time it takes to complete nuanced, theoretically driven research makes it difficult for any scholarly agenda to keep up with a rapidly changing world. Furthermore, scholars need to be careful not to adjust their findings to gain the good graces of policymakers (Barma and Goldgeier 2022). Janice Gross Stein has warned her fellow academics that “we will be seduced by the proximity to power and shade what we say in order to retain access” (quoted in Drezner 2017, 15–16).

The global trend of political polarization can further complicate bridging (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018; Carothers and O’Donohue 2019). In highly

⁵The New Voices in National Security initiative is supported by the Raymond Frankel Foundation.

⁶See <https://rhg.com/event/new-climate-leadership-state-and-non-state-drivers-of-worldwide-action/> and Busby and Urpelainen (2018).

polarized environments, partisans often rely on cues from leaders or elites in their own party when forming opinions on issues, while discounting or dismissing information from other sources (Guisinger and Saunders 2017; Barker and Suhay 2021; Friedrichs and Tama 2022). These biases can prevent experts from reaching large segments of the population with their research findings and ideas. Moreover, political leaders sometimes denigrate experts for partisan reasons, adding to the polarization of views. For instance, many Republican elected officials have attacked scholars of race and racism in recent years, making it less likely that Republican citizens will be open to those scholars' findings and perspectives (Goldberg 2021). Compounding these problems, an increasing share of public-facing research and writing is funded by donors with partisan or ideological agendas, leading the marketplace of ideas to be weighted in favor of work that reflects or advances particular worldviews (Drezner 2017, 53–61).

These trends are exacerbated by the broader rise of societal mistrust of expertise. As technology has democratized access to information and public confidence in prestigious institutions has declined, more and more people have come to feel that citizens without specialized training have as much of a claim as experts with advanced degrees to knowledge on topics of public importance (Drezner 2017; Nichols 2017). This attitude contributes to the persistence among segments of the public of views that have been discredited by scientists, such as the notion that human behavior does not contribute to climate change or that COVID-19 is harmless (Egan and Mullin 2017; Troiano and Nardi 2021).

In short, shifts in the public agenda are creating openings for emerging scholars to bridge the gap on new issues, but rising polarization and the diminished standing of experts can make it harder for scholars to reach some audiences. Recognizing where the opportunities for bridging are greatest and where they are more constrained and riskier will help scholars navigate public and policy engagement effectively.

Media

The media landscape for communicating ideas or findings to nonacademic audiences has also changed dramatically from Bridging 1.0 to Bridging 2.0, from an environment dominated by a small number of prominent print publications and television stations to one marked by far more avenues for contributing to policy debates. In Bridging 2.0, long-standing leading outlets such as *Foreign Affairs* and *The New York Times* remain important, but scholars can also reach influential audiences by publishing in an array of new and specialized publications as well as online venues and by communicating about their work on social media sites, such as Twitter. This shift has reduced barriers to entry and facilitated the emergence of a greater diversity of voices in public and policy debates. It has also brought a variety of challenges, from the prevalence of discrimination and harassment online to the vanishingly small signal-to-noise ratio on social media.

Perhaps the most important feature associated with Bridging 2.0 is that it has made it easier for scholars who are not already known to policy magazine or newspaper opinion editors to get their ideas or findings into the conversation. In Bridging 1.0, a small number of editors and other traditional gatekeepers had considerable power over a scholar's effort to translate their research for a broader audience. To be sure, a scholar rejected by editors at the most highly regarded publications could still seek to publish their work in a lesser-known policy magazine or newspaper, but such a piece might not be noticed by elite practitioners or commentators. Before media was available online, readers would only see a piece if they subscribed to the publication or read it at their local library. If one had a piece accepted at a fine newspaper such as the *San Jose Mercury News*, for example, neither the author nor the outlet had much ability to generate a broader readership beyond the core

subscribers. Within government, such a publication might be included in the print *Early Bird*, a collection of articles distributed each day throughout the Pentagon, but that might be the only way of getting such an op-ed in front of policymakers.

In Bridging 2.0, there exist many more opportunities for scholars to enter into the public sphere. Online formats allow major newspaper opinion pages and policy magazines to publish an order of magnitude more pieces per year than they used to, opening up more slots for contributors to fill. Those pieces are also available to anyone in the world with an uncensored internet connection (although some have paywalls). Beyond those long-standing outlets, newer venues have proliferated online that greatly expand the publishing options available to scholars. These venues include the *Monkey Cage*—for 9 years published at the *Washington Post* (Dionne, Farrell, and Sides 2022)—which publishes articles that use political science research to shed light on current public issues; *The Conversation*, which publishes opinion and analysis pieces by scholars across all academic disciplines; *War on the Rocks*, which publishes research-based articles of interest to the defense policy community; *Duck of Minerva*, which publishes pieces with a broad world politics focus; and *Political Violence at a Glance*, which publishes work on the causes and consequences of violence and protest. The *Monkey Cage* and *The Conversation* illustrate the extent to which these and other outlets have opened up opportunities for a large number of scholars. By March 2019, nearly 3,500 political scientists had published in the *Monkey Cage* (Farrell and Knight 2019). By July 2021, more than 66,000 scholars in the social sciences, humanities, and sciences had published in one of *The Conversation's* eight editions across the globe.⁷

Social media outlets have further expanded the opportunities for scholars to reach a variety of audiences, and some scholars have been very successful in using these media for this purpose. For instance, University of Chicago Associate Professor Paul Poast regularly posts incisive and accessible threads discussing IR scholarship to tens of thousands of followers on Twitter. Occasionally, scholars are able to generate a fairly large audience even as graduate students, something that would have been unheard of in the pre-internet age. Assistant Professors Kelebogile Zvobgo (William and Mary) and Anna Meier (University of Nottingham) each have more than 10,000 followers on Twitter, and they developed this audience as graduate students posting not only about their research, but also about their experiences and views on graduate education. Podcasts, such as *Global Dispatches*, which examines the gamut of international affairs issues, and *Conversation Six*, which enables scholars to produce 6-minute recordings based on their expertise, provide additional means for scholars to reach broad audiences.

The proliferation of online outlets and media facilitates greater diversity of voices in public and policy conversations. While discrimination and harassment on social media can deter scholars from underrepresented communities from participating in these fora (see our discussion of this problem below), the greater number of venues and editors involved in publishing work by scholars for public audiences means that unconventional perspectives are more likely to find a reputable home. At the same time, more editors at prominent outlets have become attentive to the importance of publishing a diverse set of voices and covering emerging or non-traditional issues (Feyer 2020). For example, as the Black Lives Matter movement grew in 2020, *Foreign Policy* published important pieces arguing for more attention to race and racism in research and teaching on IR (Bhambra et al. 2020; Shilliam 2020; Zvobgo and Loken 2020).

Overall, Bridging 2.0 is more conducive than Bridging 1.0 to timely contributions to public and policy debates. Before the rise of online media, newspaper op-ed pages represented the only avenue for scholars to publish work in a matter of days. Now scholars can quickly get their takes on breaking news or important events into

⁷ Email correspondence with Eric Zack, Director, University Relations, *The Conversation* (July 28, 2021).

the public domain through online articles or social media posts. Moreover, online media not only facilitate rapid publication, but also enable more extensive distribution of research via email or social networks. For all of these and other reasons, Marc Lynch, one of the editors of the *Monkey Cage*, has called the current era a “golden age of academic engagement with the public sphere” (Lynch 2016).

And yet, recent surveys of policymakers in the trade, development, and national security sphere do introduce a note of caution. On the positive side, nearly 60% of policymakers reported visiting blogs featuring work by scholars at least a few times per month. Even so, most respondents said that academic journal articles were more valuable than new media, and that they visited these sites to supplement their news intake, not to learn about the latest academic findings or get tips on policy prescriptions (Avey et al. 2021).

More broadly, the evolving media landscape also presents some important challenges for scholars when it comes to bridging. Faculty members who seek to complement their academic publications with outreach via new media are adding to an already challenging workload, particularly if they are early career scholars on the tenure track and/or if they are caregivers. The proliferation of outlets can also make it harder to break through the social media noise with any one piece.

Relatedly, the diversification of the media landscape can make it more difficult for faculty members to demonstrate the impact of their work, compared to more traditional measures such as journal impact factors or academic citations. Different types of media outlets generate varying degrees of visibility (Avey et al. 2022), but quantifying their value or impact is bound to be challenging. For instance, how much weight should be accorded in tenure and promotion processes to research-based blog posts or Twitter threads that gain a great deal of attention? It may also make sense to distinguish between media engagement in which a scholar is offering an opinion simply as an informed citizen and media engagement in which a scholar is providing a perspective that is based on their scholarly expertise. Operationalizing standards for evaluating the importance of media outreach is only made more challenging by the speed of change in the media environment. At the same time, any efforts to reward social media engagement must not disincentive scholars from pursuing more private forms of interaction with policymakers and practitioners. Such direct interactions are often the most impactful form of policy engagement, but cannot always be publicized.⁸

Some IR bloggers, including *Duck of Minerva* founder Daniel Nexon, have raised another concern—that the “professionalization” of blogs such as the *Monkey Cage* may reduce space for more open-ended and less polished online discussions of IR (Greer 2021; Nexon 2021b). The concern here is that it is valuable for political scientists not only to summarize policy-relevant research findings for nonacademic audiences—the mission of outlets such as the *Monkey Cage*—but also to offer and debate preliminary ideas that might or might not ultimately hold up. Going forward, it is important that such online conversations retain a place in the blogosphere and that political scientists continue to engage in them.

One issue that often makes faculty extremely nervous is how their work can be used by policymakers to pursue policies the scholars might not support. In 2021, the *Duck of Minerva* published a symposium in reaction to an article by Paul Musgrave on political-science “lab leaks,” that is, ideas that, having escaped the confines of academia, may get distorted by policymakers (Nexon 2021a; Barma and Goldgeier 2022). Short-form writing may require stripping nuance from an argument, whose supporting evidence may be unlikely to be read. Scholars often cringe when they see the headlines that newspapers give their op-eds, as these headlines are designed to drive readership, not provide an accurate reflection of an academic argument.

⁸We are grateful to one of the reviewers for suggesting some of these points.

As scholars increasingly promote their work on social media and produce short-form pieces and blog posts, they can be subject to unwelcome personal and threatening attacks in ways that are new to them if they previously wrote solely for academic audiences. This is particularly true for women, persons of color, and members of the LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or other non-straight, non-cisgender identity) community. These individuals often face vile commentary and abuse, including threats of bodily harm, from the darkest corners of the internet.

This harassment is not just a challenge for scholars seeking to contribute to important scholarly and policy debates. The universities where these scholars work can get caught straddling a line between academic freedom and backlash targeted at faculty. After a right-wing attack ad on Facebook targeted Stanford political scientist Hakeem Jefferson in November 2021, Jefferson tweeted: “Recruiting Black faculty is hardly meaningful if the institution lacks the courage to stand vocally in support of them when the rubber hits the road. Stanford should be ashamed of its public silence in the face of the racist attacks I’ve received. Embarrassing and telling.”⁹

In contrast, also in 2021, Syracuse University publicly backed a faculty member who was subjected to harassment, threats, and calls for their firing. Assistant Professor Jenn Jackson, who identifies as queer and genderflux, commented on the idea that September 11 was “the first time that Americans ever felt fear.” Jackson wrote that while that may have been true for white Americans, “plenty of us Americans know what it’s like to experience fear and we knew before 9/11.” They called 9/11 “an attack on the systems many white Americans fight to protect.” Jackson received a torrent of attacks, some of which were personally threatening (Flaherty 2021). In response, Syracuse Chancellor Kent Syverud and Maxwell School Dean David Van Slyke issued a statement saying that critics are free to disagree with their faculty, but “what cannot be tolerated are the harassment and violent threats that we have seen in response that have been directed at this professor. Our Department of Public Safety is in contact with the professor and has engaged the support of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies ... Syracuse University will stand by the principles of free speech and by our commitment to keeping our community safe in the face of threats and harassment.”¹⁰ *Inside HigherEd* noted that the Syracuse University statement “was unusually unequivocal and prompt for a response to public anger about a scholar’s comments; more typically, colleges and universities distance themselves from professors’ contentious comments or say nothing at all” (Flaherty 2021).

The upshot is that the rise of new media is a double-edged sword, democratizing opportunities for public engagement while exposing some scholars to new or heightened dangers. Scholars thinking about engaging with public and policy audiences via new media should recognize both these opportunities and these risks.

Academia

The higher education landscape for connecting with public and policy audiences has also shifted from Bridging 1.0 to Bridging 2.0. Overall, taking stock of the university and disciplinary contexts for bridging today yields a mixed assessment. We see significant progress in scholarly interest in and opportunities for bridging in academia, but less movement in professional incentives for scholars to engage publicly.

Universities are grappling today with increasing responsibilities as vital societal institutions in local, national, and global spheres. In the twenty-first century,

⁹ See <https://twitter.com/hakeemjefferson/status/1457090375160524801?s=11>.

¹⁰ Message from Chancellor Kent Syverud and Dean David Van Slyke, Syracuse University (September 13, 2021), <https://news.syr.edu/blog/2021/09/13/message-from-chancellor-kent-syverud-and-dean-david-van-slyke/>.

universities have come more and more to embrace an identity in which they are embedded in and serving society, rather than standing apart from it. This new reality is felt acutely by top university leadership and boards of trustees, who are pressured to engage by multifaceted constituencies of donors, students, and parents, as well as state legislatures for public universities.

At a “Provosts Summit” hosted by BTG in 2016, thirteen provosts and other senior university administrators, representing a diverse set of public and private universities from across the country (large and small, research- and teaching-oriented, majority white and historically black colleges and universities), discussed their experiences promoting public engagement on their campuses.¹¹ The group made clear their desire for faculty to pursue public engagement, and discussed a range of initiatives at their universities, including encouraging interdisciplinary work to ask big, important questions; strengthening university communications teams to support faculty; honoring community-engaged scholarship; and, in one case, providing “policy navigators”—individuals with knowledge of the policy community—to help connect faculty to policy audiences. They expressed frustration with academic departments, however, for not providing sufficient credit to their faculty for this type of work, and noted that external letters received for tenure and promotion evaluations tend to focus almost exclusively on academic publications.¹²

Sally Kornbluth, who participated in the 2016 BTG meeting as Duke Provost and is now President of Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), created a campus-wide Tenure Standards Committee (TSC) and asked Duke Professor and BTG senior adviser Bruce Jentleson to co-chair it. Public scholarship and policy outreach were identified as among the “increasingly diverse forms of scholarship” for which the criteria for tenure and promotion needed to be re-evaluated. The TSC made a series of recommendations for how to do this, proposing a “federalism” of university-wide standards adapted to different schools, departments, and disciplines.¹³ These are being gradually implemented (the pandemic has led to delays) across the university. Some other universities have undertaken similar efforts (Desch et al. 2022). For example, Stanford Impact Labs, led by Jeremy Weinstein, is providing grants, fellowships, professorships, and staff support for scholar–practitioner partnerships and other efforts based on the conviction that “linking research and practical experience creates new insights and better evidence.”¹⁴

A systematic effort to investigate how various disciplines spanning the physical sciences, humanities and other fields are addressing the importance of public engagement may offer many helpful ideas for how to best incentivize and reward this type of work in the field of international studies. Along those lines, a coalition of about fifty foundations and other funders both private (Pew Charitable Trusts in the lead, William T. Grant and Carnegie Corporation of New York as major partners) and public (e.g., the National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, and National Aeronautics and Space Administration) have created the Transforming Evidence Funders Network (TEFN).¹⁵ One of TEFN’s main initiatives, “expanding

¹¹ Summary of Meeting of University Provosts, American University (June 10, 2016), <https://bridgingtheproject.org/engagement/>.

¹² Norms around external letters may be shifting along with the broader landscape. One of us was recently asked to focus a letter for a tenured full professor appointment for which public scholarship was a key criterion on “the candidate’s commitment to understanding or addressing important, contemporary issues in ways that illuminate problems, propose innovative solutions, develop novel methods for approaching problems. Factors for consideration include: the nature and scope of public intellectual or policy engagement; leadership in policy-relevant teaching and training; impact in a public service role; formal or informal influence in policy circles; or ability to translate scholarship into policy formulations.”

¹³ Duke Tenure Standards Committee, “Tenure Standards Committee Report” (May 2018), <https://strategicplan.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2018/11/TSC-report-final-May-2018.pdf>.

¹⁴ Stanford University, Stanford Impact Labs, <https://impact.stanford.edu/>.

¹⁵ Pew Charitable Trusts, The Transforming Evidence Funders Network, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/fact-sheets/2022/04/the-transforming-evidence-funders-network>.

academic incentives,” focuses on research with societal impact from the local to the global and strategizes ways to foster and incentivize such work, including changes in university tenure and promotion systems.¹⁶

While measuring societal and policy impact poses difficulties, two points are important to take into account. First, as delineated in the Existing Policies and Practices section of the Duke Tenure Standards Committee report, many of the standard metrics used in assessing quality, impact, and productivity of more strictly academic scholarship (e.g., *h*-index, journal impact factor, Eigenfactor) have their own issues of reliability and validity.¹⁷ Second, progress continues to be made on new metrics and other measures. See, for example, the Metrics Toolkit developed by an editorial board of “scientometrics experts well versed in research impact metrics and their real-world applications,” and the Humane Metrics Initiative “committed to establishing humane indicators of excellence in academia, focused particularly on the humanities and social sciences.”¹⁸ Another model comes from National Science Foundation (NSF) grant applications, which are evaluated according to both intellectual merit and broader impacts. NSF defines broader impacts as “the potential to benefit society and contribute to the achievement of specific, desired societal outcomes.”¹⁹

Professional associations across social science disciplines now explicitly recognize the changing nature and valuation of public engagement. An American Sociological Association report noted in 2016, “Increasingly, sociologists use multiple forms of communication to engage broader audiences with their research and contribute to solutions of the pressing problems of our time.”²⁰ Similarly, the American Anthropological Association issued guidelines in 2017 “intended to assist tenure and promotion committees in assessing the quality of new, public forms of anthropological scholarship that are not typically accounted for in existing guidelines.”²¹ The American Political Science Association (APSA) affirmed in a statement in 2020 the association’s “commitment to scholarship and professional practices that contribute to social as well as intellectual progress. As a scholarly discipline, political science has a special connection to public life.”²²

Beginning over 15 years ago with BTG, Carnegie Corporation of New York has played a lead role in funding a set of university-based projects under the broad bridging the gap and responsible public engagement rubrics.²³ The Scholars

¹⁶ Along with Emily Ozer, Professor of Community Health Sciences at the UC Berkeley School of Public Health, and Jennifer Renick, Assistant Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Memphis, Jentleson is working with TEFN on an initial report on relevant efforts, models, strategies, and recommendations going forward.

¹⁷ Duke Tenure Standards Committee Report, 8-13.

¹⁸ Metrics Toolkit Editorial Board, “Metrics ToolKit,” <https://www.metrics-toolkit.org/>, and HumetricsHSS, Humane Metrics Initiative, <https://humetricshss.org/>. Among others, see also Long (2017); Campus Compact, “Demonstrating Quality and Impact of Engaged Scholarship,” <https://compact.org/resources/demonstrating-quality-and-impacts-of-engaged-scholarship>.

¹⁹ National Science Foundation, “Perspectives on Broader Impacts,” <https://beta.nsf.gov/funding/learn/broader-impacts>.

²⁰ American Sociological Association Subcommittee on the Evaluation of Social Media and Public Communication in Sociology, “What Counts? Evaluating Public Communication in Tenure and Promotion” (2016), https://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/tf_report_what_counts_evaluating_public_communication_in_tenure_and_promotion_final_august_2016.pdf.

²¹ American Anthropological Association, “AAA Guidelines for Tenure and Promotion Review: Communicating Public Scholarship in Anthropology” (2017), <https://www.americananthro.org/AdvanceYourCareer/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=21713>.

²² American Political Science Association, “APSA Statement on the Essential Role of Social Scientific Inquiry in Maintaining a Free, Participatory, Civil, and Law-Governed Society” (August 10, 2020), <https://apsanet.org/Portals/54/docs/APSA%20Statement%20on%20the%20Essential%20Role%20of%20Social%20Scientific%20Inquiry.pdf?ver=2020-08-10-124453-990>.

²³ Carnegie Corporation of New York, “Bridging the Gap: Carnegie Corporation of New York Awards \$5 Million to Universities for Innovative Programs Linking Academia and Policy” (September 23, 2014), <https://www.carnegie.org/news/articles/bridging-the-gap-carnegie-corporation-of-new-york-awards-5-million-to-universities-for-innovative-programs-linking-academia-and-policy/>.

Strategy Network led by Harvard Professor Theda Skocpol is another such program, focusing more on American domestic policy and politics with a structure based on regional–local chapters and with private capital as well as grant funding.²⁴ These programs have demonstrated successes in terms of both their public-facing output and their uptake in the academic world. For instance, interest in BTG’s professional development programs has continued to grow over the last decade. From 2013–2017 to 2018–2022, the average number of applications to BTG’s New Era program for PhD students increased by 47 percent and the average number of applications to BTG’s International Policy Summer Institute for faculty increased by 158 percent. Moreover, these applications have come from scholars at a wide array of colleges and universities. From 2013 to 2022, scholars at 193 different institutions applied to BTG’s New Era program. Data from surveys of participants in BTG’s International Policy Summer Institute also show that participants felt much better prepared for and confident in their ability to conduct public and policy engagement after participating in the program (Tama, Rublee, and Urban 2023).

While bridging is in part motivated by the belief that scholars can make important contributions to policy, the value also comes back to the academic side of the gap. Policy engagement and public scholarship often enhance faculty research and teaching. Moreover, institutionally, the strength of universities in part depends on competing effectively for human capital in an evolving intellectual marketplace. A growing array of “alt-ac” (alternative-to-academic) options exist within government, at other research organizations (including think tanks and commercial labs), in the private sector, at foundations, and at international and domestic NGOs (Goldgeier and Wittes, *Forthcoming*). Such opportunities promote competition for today’s brightest PhD talents, many of whom previously worked in various policy capacities in government, the military, international institutions, NGOs, and elsewhere. These scholars seek policy and public relevance in their scholarship, and are disinclined to pursue careers in which such engagement is not welcome or fostered. Many emerging scholars from historically marginalized groups have strong interests in public engagement threaded through their research agendas. The rise of such social media presences as #WomenAlsoKnow and #POCAlsoKnow, as well as of conferences such as the Future Strategy Forum, which over several years brought together female academics and practitioners in national security, demonstrate the desire of underrepresented scholars to share their substantive expertise in policy and public arenas.

There are also numerous opportunities for scholars to test and develop their scholarly ideas at think tanks, which put a premium on conveying research to policymakers, and in government, whether on fellowships or as political appointees. Think tanks often appoint professors as nonresident scholars, who then engage in the policy-relevant meetings and publications of the institution. And many academics have served temporarily in government, whether in political appointments, on Intergovernmental Personnel Agreements (IPAs), or through fellowships—such as those provided by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), the APSA, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)—that are designed to place scholars in policy positions where they can provide their academic expertise directly to policy.²⁵ There are so many examples of individuals serving in these roles that Johns Hopkins Professor Francis J. Gavin declared recently that “the gap has been bridged” (Gavin 2022).

Notwithstanding the advances and the changed landscape described here, barriers and disincentives to policy-engaged scholarship persist. While some faculty

²⁴ See <https://scholars.org/about>.

²⁵ On IPAs, see <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/hiring-information/intergovernment-personnel-act/#url=Provisions>. On fellowships, see, for example, <https://www.cfr.org/fellowships>;; <https://www.aaas.org/fellowships>;; <https://apsanet.org/cfp>.

face few expectations from the departments or schools to go beyond strictly academic work, others have administrators who want them to do more, but may not be able to sufficiently credit this work during tenure and promotion evaluations or merit reviews. When Michael Desch et al. surveyed chairs of the top fifty political science departments and deans of international affairs schools in the United States, they found that the top priority for both groups was having faculty who publish university press books and/or peer-reviewed academic articles in high-impact journals, keeping assessments of academic excellence heavily defined within disciplinary boundaries. Reinforcing a still deeply embedded belief that policy-relevant research is somehow not *quite* legitimate scholarship, department chairs were not very interested in whether faculty went beyond those traditional academic publications. Policy school deans, on the other hand, were more eager that their faculty do broader engagement, thus putting additional burdens on those faculty—even as the deans acknowledged that tenure standards at their institutions often fell short in crediting such work (Desch et al. 2022).

Although we remain concerned about the lagging incentive structure in academia and the accompanying socialization of faculty motivations, many scholars have achieved success on both sides of the gap. A 2020 survey of BTG program alumni showed 48 percent with tenure and an additional 23 percent on the tenure track. Among those with tenure at the time they completed the survey, 34 percent had been awarded tenure since participating in a BTG program.²⁶ In addition, an impressive 72 percent of program alumni had received an external award, fellowship, or joint appointment since participating in a BTG training. Half of respondents reported that specific publications, media products, or curricular innovations had been inspired by their BTG experience.

The BTG book series with Oxford University Press has also generated a steady stream of submissions. This series publishes books that employ social science theory and methods to answer policy-relevant research questions. Authors include junior and senior faculty, and the books have won prestigious scholarly awards and been key components of tenure and promotion packages.²⁷ The success of the series suggests a strong appetite for long-form, rigorous scholarship that connects directly to important policy debates.

On the whole, the Bridging 2.0 landscape within academia is more positive than that of Bridging 1.0. University leaders, professional associations, and faculty members have all shown a growing interest in public and policy engagement. At the same time, the greater but still limited value placed on bridging in most tenure and promotion processes means that scholars retain much stronger incentives to pursue traditional modes of peer-reviewed publication, sometimes to the exclusion of policy-relevant and public-facing work. These incentives are only heightened by the increasing academic standards for achieving tenure and promotion, which can make it all the more difficult for many scholars to act on their desire to reach audiences outside the academy.

Looking Ahead: Bridging 3.0

Given the observed changes in bridging across the societal, media, and academic landscapes since 2006, we believe that the relationship between scholars and the public sphere will continue to evolve. To understand the possible contours of this evolution to Bridging 3.0, we undertook a future-oriented scenario analysis exercise focused on key drivers of the bridging environment. Scenario analysis is a tool used in business, government, and academia to uncover important dynamics of the evolving operating environment by “juxtaposing current trends in unexpected

²⁶ The survey was sent to 434 program alumni and had a response rate of 16 percent.

²⁷ See <https://bridgingthegapproject.org/btgseries-2/>.

combinations in order to articulate surprising and yet plausible futures” (Barma et al. 2016, 119). To better understand the future of bridging, we identified major uncertainties about the evolving scholar–policy nexus, selected two especially salient axes of uncertainty to illustrate the range of different “worlds” in which future bridging efforts might take place, and explored the implications of that uncertainty for the bridging enterprise.

Constructing Scenarios: Major Uncertainties of Bridging 3.0

The trends from Bridging 1.0 to Bridging 2.0 discussed above point to key features of the social, media, and academic environments that are likely to dictate future opportunities for public engagement by scholars. We enumerate here eight major features of the bridging landscape, extrapolating from issues discussed above as well as introducing a couple of potential new drivers. Although they are not the only such considerations, the range of plausible outcomes for each feature reflects core elements of the uncertainty embedded in the bridging environment. Taken together, they span crucial questions about the evolving landscape for Bridging 3.0.

FEATURE 1: THE MARKET FOR ACADEMIC INSIGHTS

While interest in scholarly findings outside the academy has increased in Bridging 2.0, we do not presume that this will continue in Bridging 3.0. The market for academic insights could shift back to a more insular focus on producing research for other scholars exclusively or could expand to find even more demand among public and policy audiences.



FEATURE 2: THE ROLE OF FAST DIGITAL MEDIA IN KNOWLEDGE DISSEMINATION

The rise of online media has dramatically changed how knowledge and expertise spread beyond the halls of academe. The Bridging 3.0 environment could see this trend accelerate and even supplant traditional print and long-form media, or digital media could remain one of many sources of information.



FEATURE 3: THE PRIMARY LOCUS OF RESEARCH AND NEW KNOWLEDGE CREATION

Social and political knowledge is generated across a range of public, private, and academic settings. In Bridging 3.0, the relative importance of these varied sources will change depending on what research topics, resources, and transmission belts are most germane, affecting how widely accessible new knowledge will be.



FEATURE 4: THE DEGREE OF COUPLING BETWEEN ACADEMIC RESEARCH AND GEOPOLITICS

Academic research can be motivated by current affairs and policy needs, or by empirical or theoretical puzzles untroubled by the news of the day. Opportunities for public engagement in Bridging 3.0 will depend on how closely scholarly output is motivated by and relevant to contemporary global issues.



FEATURE 5: US THEORY AND PARADIGM DOMINANCE IN INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

For much of the last century, international affairs research has been dominated by scholars based at US universities. The landscape of Bridging 3.0 will depend on the degree to which this intellectual hegemony continues in the coming decades.



FEATURE 6: SOCIETAL VALENCE TOWARD “EXPERTISE”

The range and volume of voices and opinions made available by digital media has coincided with increased skepticism that “expert” views should have a place of privilege in the marketplace of ideas (Drezner 2017). General levels of trust in research findings and other forms of expertise will impact opportunities for public engagement by scholars in Bridging 3.0.



FEATURE 7: LEVELS OF PARTISANSHIP AND EPISTEMIC FRACTURE

The polarization of recent US debates over racism and COVID-19 are just two examples of how partisanship can lead to systematically divergent views about who and what should be believed. In addition to broad social views about expertise (feature 6), Bridging 3.0 will be impacted by how individual identity groups understand truth and knowledge differently.



FEATURE 8: SOURCES OF RESEARCH FUNDING

The type of research funding that is available to support scholarship will also shape the Bridging 3.0 environment. Funding models that privilege rapid research on

current problems on the policy agenda (“impatient money”) will create different incentives and opportunities for scholars than those targeting longer-term research topics and approaches.



Each of these features describes an important uncertainty about the future of public and policy engagement by scholars. Together, they show just how contingent the Bridging 3.0 environment will be for scholars seeking to bring their expertise into the public sphere.

Exploring Scenarios: Drilling Down into Possible Futures

Scenarios are not forecasts or predictions. The goal of scenario analysis is to combine plausible expectations in surprising ways that enable decision-makers to envision discontinuous future worlds and, where relevant, adapt strategy across those possibilities in robust ways. To illustrate how we might challenge our collective imagination on what the Bridging 3.0 landscape might look like, we juxtapose two features against each other: the degree of coupling between research and geopolitics (feature 4) and funding models for international affairs scholarship (feature 8). In the spirit of challenging received wisdom about what “bridging the gap” looks like, we selected this particular pairing based on a facilitated discussion about which axes might most challenge our going-in assumptions about the Bridging 3.0 landscape.²⁸ **Figure 1** shows the four possible “worlds” established by this combination.

The next step in our scenario exercise was to “tell the story” of these worlds, or how they look and feel to scholars, and explore what challenges and opportunities, both familiar and unexpected, they suggest for bridging efforts. For example, *World II* tracks closely with what might be termed an Ivory Tower model of research production, in which scholarship is motivated by disciplinary debates and the production of knowledge for its own sake—rather than the contemporary demands of policy audiences—and funders across government, philanthropy, and academia recognize and support this approach. *World I* also reflects a high degree of separation between current geopolitical questions and research within the academy, but finds funders more interested in sponsoring research on topics of short-term interest to decision-makers. In this world, we might see fewer opportunities for bridging by university-based scholars, as funding flows to researchers closer to the policy process, such as those at think tanks or Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs). *Worlds III and IV* posit a research environment that is more tightly coupled to contemporary geopolitics. In these worlds, academic hiring, publishing, and other practices privilege scholarship that connects to observable problems in the world, rather than to esoteric theoretical debates. In *World III*, funders remain committed to long-term knowledge building, even as research questions are largely shaped by current events. This model might be compared to that of the US national laboratories or the National Science Foundation. *World IV* will likely look the least desirable from the standpoint of many scholars, as both academic and funding priorities are driven by short-term policy needs—yet opportunities for policy engagement still emerge. In this world, university-based research might come to look more like that of strategic consulting firms such as Oxford Analytica or the geopolitical intelligence platform Stratfor, providing on-demand analysis that is less

²⁸ This represents one of twenty-eight possible pairings of the eight features introduced above. Other informed analysts might wish to select other pairings (as well as additional features) to emphasize. Our purpose is to illustrate, not to foreclose, further conversation on potential Bridging 3.0 landscapes.

Coupling between Academic Research and Geopolitics

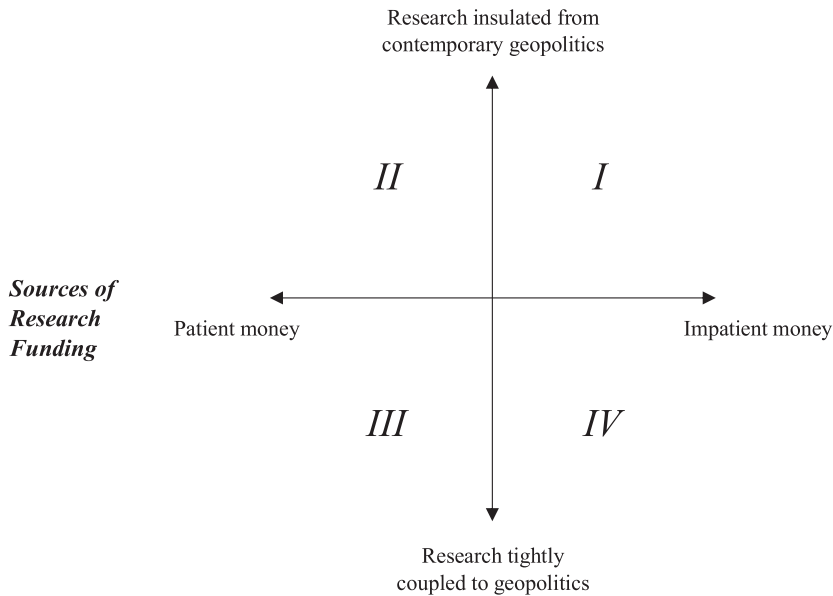


Figure 1. Juxtaposing two features of Bridging 3.0 landscape.

about bridging than about eliding differences between the academic and policy worlds.

Through facilitated discussion of various implications of these worlds, we generated at least three lessons for the bridging enterprise. First, *the gap between academia and policy is inherent, important, and useful: bridging does not mean eliminating*. There is a danger in too much policy-side demand for scholarly expertise, to the extent that this interest comes to be reflected in funding priorities and academic practices. At the extreme—*World IV* in our scenario—the academic rigor and deep knowledge that provide long-term benefits to society might be sacrificed in favor of demand-driven research on short-term policy priorities. Leaders in academia, philanthropy, and government should be aware of the risks involved in swinging research practices too far toward policy relevance.

Second, *scholars with policy-relevant expertise should consider multiple pathways for sharing their knowledge*. The four worlds described above suggest different loci for expertise entering the policy world, depending on the nature of funding models and the degree of coupling between research priorities and geopolitics. Researchers interested in bridging might consider getting involved with think tanks, FFRDCs, government-based research centers, or other nonacademic enterprises, as preparation for a possible future in which these organizations become even more central to the practice of providing relevant expertise to policymakers.

Third, *scholars will influence which of these worlds come to pass*. In setting research agendas within academia, scholars can shape the extent to which research is connected to or insulated from geopolitics. Perhaps more surprisingly, scholars can also influence the nature of research funding models. To be sure, other powerful societal forces will have great impact on these models. However, scholars can use the many avenues available to them for public engagement to make a compelling case for the types of funding that will be most valuable for addressing key global challenges. For instance, if scholars demonstrate that long-term investments in research

pay large societal dividends—and, most especially, demonstrate the particular value of their work—funders will be more likely to consider such investments worthwhile.

Scenario thinking is not designed to provide answers or predictions about how the future will look but rather to surface, as we have through this exercise, important *questions* and *uncertainties* related to goals or risks that we care about in the bridging enterprise. Extensions of this scenario approach, along with other forward-looking analytical techniques, could allow others to develop a more refined understanding of how to achieve their own bridging goals in the future.

Conclusions

Few discussions of bridging to date have taken into account the ways that the bridging environment has shifted over time. In this article, we have homed in on three important elements of this environment, explaining how changes in society, the media, and academia have made bridging easier in some respects and more challenging in others. We have also sought to illuminate how the context for bridging may evolve further in the years ahead. Rather than making predictions, our scenario exercise provides a means of highlighting key uncertainties and considering the implications of alternative worlds that may emerge.

Based on this analysis and these scenarios, we offer in closing some propositions for scholars and research institutions thinking about linking research and policy in the coming years.

Effective bridging will involve developing fresh expertise on the emerging issues that are likely to be of greatest importance to society in the years ahead. For individual scholars, this will mean pursuing research on emerging issues before they reach the front burner of public attention. For academic institutions, this will mean investing in scholars who are tackling the types of questions that will need to be answered in the world of tomorrow. Importantly, this forward-looking approach does not entail following the current agendas of policymakers, but rather requires preserving a sufficient gap between academia and policy to enable scholars to focus on issues that are not yet preoccupying political leaders and other decision-makers.

Effective bridging will involve reaching beyond traditional foreign policy decision-makers. Given the increased importance of transnational and domestic issues, bridging will need to take place at local, national, and global levels and with different types of public, private, and nonprofit institutions and actors.

Effective bridging will involve disseminating ideas and findings in a range of formats. Rather than just taking a single bite at the apple when it comes to public engagement, scholars will be best served by using a variety and combination of public-facing and social media to reach different audiences.

Effective bridging will occur more often if academic institutions further incentivize it. Although some universities and professional associations have made important strides toward valuing public engagement, much more needs to be done to recognize and reward scholars for contributing to public conversations and policymaking on critical issues.

Effective bridging will occur more often if society values expertise. Political attacks on expertise raise the prospect of scholarship becoming illegitimate in much of society. It will be easier for scholars to get the attention of the public and decision-makers if the perceived value of expertise is maintained and restored.

Effective bridging will occur more often if polarization is contained. Political polarization leads many pundits and policymakers to dismiss certain ideas or findings out of hand. Scholars will be more capable of reaching a broad cross-section of opinion leaders and decision-makers if polarization stops rising.

Effective bridging on global challenges will require long-term investments in scholarly research. If funding models prioritize immediate results, scholars will have limited capacity to conduct the deep studies needed to generate solutions to the world's

greatest challenges. Longer-term investments will facilitate bridging that pays big dividends to society down the road.

All that said, we have only scratched the surface here regarding the shifting landscape for bridging. How might changes in technology alter the context for bridging in the years ahead? What new opportunities and challenges for bridging might be presented by the continued rise of China or by the global diffusion of power to a wider set of countries? How might a more sustained shift in education from in-person to online learning alter bridging incentives within academia? We look forward to others joining us in this work by exploring these and other aspects of the changing environment for linking research and policy.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

Naazneen Barma, Brent Durbin, and Jordan Tama serve as co-directors of Bridging the Gap. James Goldgeier and Bruce Jentleson serve as senior advisors with Bridging the Gap.

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